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The Real Philippine Election Story

By Ben J. Wattenberg

It is by now the received wisdom that Corazon Aquino became president of the Philippines because corrupt dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his thieving henchmen held a massively fraudulent election in a near-totalitarian thug state, and the outraged Filipino people rose up in righteous wrath and threw Mr. Marcos out. It must be so: Americans saw it with their own eyes on television.

I didn't. During election week I was a member of the presidential election team headed by Sen. Richard Lugar (R., Ind.). My sense is that something quite different went on in the Philippines, a country that, as our State Department briefer had told us, was one of the freest in Southeast Asia. I believe there was an open and remarkably public election, in some large measure set in motion by U.S. policy pushing for reform. There was, by Filipino standards, a normal quotient of fraud, which is plenty. The election was mildly close. In a truly fair contest, I believe Mrs. Aquino would have clearly won. It is precisely because the election was so public that it was close; it's harder to cheat in daylight. It was because the election was public, close and somewhat fraudulent that the charge of swindle—in the sense that the real loser (Marcos) was declared victor—was very credible, and why the Aquino forces were outraged. Then the people threw the corrupt thug out.

While there are some points where these two versions are similar (namely the justification of the ultimate outcome, and who the thieving villains were), the versions are rather different in essence. Because they are different, they may hold different policy lessons for the future.

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In the Philippines, our 19-member delegation split into eight separate teams—each headed by a member of Congress—and fanned out across the archipelago. U.S. military helicopters, planes and vehicles were at our disposal. Although our delegation was invited to come by the Marcos government, we went to places chosen by the U.S. Embassy and often changed our itinerary as we traveled.

What we observed firsthand was the casting and counting of votes at the grass-roots retail level only at certain places, but probably representative ones. After the election we were also able to spot-check some canvassing points in some cities.

It has been noted that any election-observation team can't see everything going on in a huge country. That is correct. It is also true that we had more people, in more places, with far more logistical support than any news organization present. (The Newsweek bureau was composed of four reporters; the New York Times had two; the Washington Post three; ABC had six; NBC had five.)

When our teams returned to Manila the day after the election, we compared notes. This may be hard to believe, but the general impression of most of the teams was that they had seen an imperfect but truly remarkable electoral scene. Brace yourself: Some of us felt that in some important respects the process was more open, more participatory, and, most critically, more public than U.S. elections.

The dominant image, to me, was the count itself. In most places, after the polls closed, voters jammed back into the polling places. After the ballot boxes were opened, the result of each ballot was called out by a school teacher. Each vote was then marked on an official tally sheet and on a blackboard. Those who voted (a process that involved affixing four thumbprints, signing five registry books, and the application of indelible ink on the cuticle of the voter's index finger) actually saw their votes posted and tallied. That doesn't happen in the U.S. When the retail process is so public it becomes much more difficult for a corrupt government to cheat wholesale. The voters know the count, and can compare it with the count in the newspaper the next day.

An excerpt from the only public statement of the Lugar delegation, issued as we left the Philippines:

"We have observed the passionate commitment of Filipinos to democracy, and we applaud that commitment. . . . The people of the Philippines have been involved in a vigorous campaign characterized by lively debate, active campaigning throughout the country, and the mobilization of the National Citizens Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) to monitor the election. *The enormous crowds drawn by the candidates and the zeal displayed by the Filipino electorate would be the envy of politicians in our own country.* (my italics).

"We have observed dedicated people inspired and motivated by their faith in democracy . . . we have seen concrete examples, both in voting and counting ballots, of success in the administration of the electoral process."

Our delegation also reported fraud:

"Sadly, however, we have witnessed and heard disturbing reports of efforts to undermine the integrity of that process, both during the voting and vote counting process which is still under way. . . . Serious charges have been made in regard to the tabulation system. . . ."

At the grass-roots level, all of the teams heard rumors about harassment, intimidation and bribery. I have never been in a more conspiratorial environment. However, it usually was very hard to find much skulduggery that could be documented.

To the best of my knowledge, none of the observers saw any actual violence. However, my colleague at the American Enterprise Institute, the election expert Howard Penniman, has analyzed data from previous elections and found that the 60 election-related deaths—believe it or not—fall into the "moderate" range for Philippine elections. That which did occur was surely tragic and repugnant. Of the 60 dead, 10 were Aquino supporters; the others were about evenly split between Marcos soldiers and communist guerrillas killing each other.

* * *

Back in Manila, many delegation members spoke with their families back in the U.S., and we began to understand how the election had been covered. Our relatives were petrified: Did the goons get you? Did you see gunfire? It's so terrible that those thugs stole the election!

It is said disparagingly of some public figures that they cannot walk and chew gum at the same time. The same must be said of a hungry international press pack, particularly those from television: They cannot cover two stories at once. There was only one story in the air in Manila, and it was being pumped out from every corner: fraud, corruption and violence. The reporting we got at home was surely not a lie; it was only unrepresentative of the total reality on the ground.

A word should be said about NAMFREL. To its everlasting credit, there could not have been even a mildly free election without it. It put 500,000 citizen-volunteers into the field! Even though the volunteers were pushed out of some places, they still had a presence in 75% to 85% of the election districts (as compared with about 50% in the 1984 election).

It should be noted that, by their own estimates, at least 90% of the NAMFREL people were pro-Aquino. And it is a government-deputized official organization. And NAMFREL leaders were masterfully marketing the stories of fraud even before the election took place. The political thrust of their pitch was elemental: If Aquino lost, the fix was in. That is not the way an unfree country usually operates.

Now the interesting thing about a political pitch is that it may even be true, or at least partially true. The Philippines does have a history of vote fraud. It did not all disappear one fine morning. There was plenty of hanky-panky going on, some of it structural, some of it shameless—particularly after the election itself. Votes were bought, there was intimidation. There were areas where Mrs. Aquino got zero votes. It is surely true that the vast bulk of the

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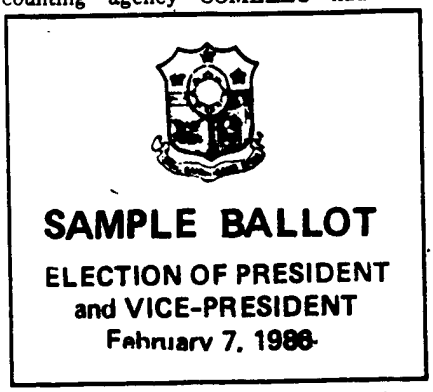
fraud was by Marcos backers, and, in my judgment and those of others, that was more than sufficient to tip the election.

How close was the election? Well, until it stopped counting, NAMFREL had Mrs. Aquino ahead with about 54% of the vote. Until it stopped counting, the government counting agency COMELEC had Mr.



SAMPLE BALLOT

ELECTION OF PRESIDENT and VICE-PRESIDENT

February 7, 1986

Marcos ahead with 52%. The National Assembly (dominated by Mr. Marcos's party) was able to cheat Mr. Marcos only up to 53.8%. The most interesting count was the CBS News sample precinct survey, supervised by the CBS election experts who do the network's surveys in America. CBS News projected the election as "too close to call."

Of course, all these counts would not include the "structural fraud"—particularly the alleged systematic disenfranchisement of voters in Metro Manila, an Aquino stronghold. Even there, however, the turnout rate fell only from 89% in the 1984 elections to 77%. And there had been a legitimate change of the registration system, requested by the opposition. Such a switch usually results in some disenfranchised voters, even under honest circumstances.

But there was surely substantial fraud in Metro Manila. The area contains about 20% of the national vote. The "missing" voters (89% less 77%) amount to 2.4% of the national total. If in a true count Mrs. Aquino would have carried, say, 75% of the missing vote (she only got 53% of the actual count in Metro Manila), it would have added about 1.2% to her national total. That is a substantial amount. It is also less than an electoral tidal wave, even if extrapolated nationally.

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Why is all of this important? After all, the good lady won and the bad dictator lost. (I confess, after some early wavering, I was an Aquino supporter, even as I boarded the plane to become an impartial election observer.) Why don't we just rejoice in it and forget the grubby details?

Because there are some lessons here. The rules of foreign policy are not precise. We don't understand how the world spins; any additional information we can glean can only help us.

First: In free countries like the U.S., the press—particularly television—can't be trusted to give a full-bodied portrait of what is going on. In the Philippines they got half the story—fraud. They missed the other half: a free culture, a mildly free election.

The portrayal of the election in this one-sided manner convinced the American public that the election was nothing more than goons run amok. That image added power to the congressional feeding frenzy about who could be more-democratic-than-thou. It was claimed, variously, that a fair election would have yielded a 60% or 70% or 80% victory for Mrs. Aquino. All of that pushed the administration to an even more anti-Marcos posture than it had previously held and allowed it to play a classic good-cop, bad-cop game with Mr. Marcos.

This time the policy-by-media wave worked out remarkably well. But suppose Mr. Marcos, sensing that he still had some real power, sensing that the Americans were being misled, had chosen to wage civil war to prove his point.

It is standard procedure for politicians and diplomats to exaggerate or even distort facts and figures. What is troubling is when they come to believe the distortions, which I sense is what happened here. You don't, as a rule, get wise policy from faulty information. Next time the media wave may come crashing in a direction that is not to America's advantage. (Recall the bang-bang coverage of the Israeli-Lebanon war.)

Second: Open, public elections, even when somewhat fraudulent, are a mighty and beneficent force—greater than we probably imagine. I believe Marcos would have been peacefully dumped even without the military revolt—although it would have taken months, not days. Because the folks at the grass roots saw the votes counted publicly, they knew who really won. Operating in a fairly open society they would have banged on Marcos until he shared power, and then kept banging on him until he left. And, unlike what did happen, it might well have happened without military action. So: Elections, being such a powerful force for good, and generally leading to pro-American governments (or at least neutral ones), should be pushed harder than ever by U.S. policy makers.

Third: Doctrines. Many liberals have maintained that the elections prove that the Jeane Kirkpatrick view of the world is wrong. Her doctrine, say the liberals, is that we ought to cozy up to our autocratic friends and oppose only our totalitarian enemies. That we were able to dump authoritarian Marcos, using U.S. political muscle, shows how wrong she was.

Of course, that is not what she said. The Philippines story could come right out the pages of Ms. Kirkpatrick. She said, recall, that friendly authoritarian states should indeed be treated differently from adversarial totalitarian ones. The authoritarian friendly ones, she maintained, could be moved gradually toward democracy because authoritarianism is less abusive of human rights than totalitarianism, because the societies are more open, because as a friend the U.S. had leverage, and because history has shown that it happens with or without our help—witness Greece, Portugal and Spain. To that list can be added Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Guatemala, perhaps Haiti—and now, the Philippines.

But what about totalitarian adversaries? Enter the Reagan Doctrine. Soviet surrogate states don't evolve toward democracy; if they try, they are slapped down by the Brezhnev Doctrine. (What's mine is mine, what's yours is negotiable.) The Reagan view is that we can help indigenous populations seeking to break the Soviet/totalitarian yoke. In select circumstances, we can provide limited military support for such enterprises.

What, then, about item A on the current agenda: Nicaragua?

In the Philippines, U.S. liberals tasted the heady wine of superpower intervention. It works! It does good things for nice people! It can even involve direct military help to the insurgents! (The U.S. provided the Aquino forces with intelligence data and fuel for their helicopters.)

The liberals had a fine rationale for action in the Philippines: The Marcos government was illegitimate because of election fraud, and disenchanted voters might join the communist New People's Army. If you don't want communism, the liberals said, pull the plug on the thug.

The Nicaraguan election of 1984 makes the Marcos election of 1986 look like it was run by the Honest Ballot Association. The Nicaraguan election had everything except an opposition that was allowed to compete. Unlike the Philippines, communism in Nicaragua is not a potential threat; it's already there, a Soviet and Cuban-backed reality. It is not 8,000 miles from America; it is close by. For Cory Aquino, read Arturo Cruz, Alfonso Robelo and Adolfo Calero, democrats all, trying to bring pluralist democracy, Filipino-style, to Nicaragua. Alas, the Sandinistas will not flee the country in the face of a media wave.

What will liberals do? Will they turn the inaccurate liberal version of Ms. Kirkpatrick's thesis on its head and support beating up on our authoritarian friends, while being tender with our totalitarian-sponsored adversaries?

That won't do. Liberals with intellectual consistency should be heading back toward their earlier, long-held, view that America is an assertive superpower that can do good in the world—in the Philippines, and in Nicaragua. If they do that, they will surely be welcomed home.

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